

20 THE CHURCH REFORMED: PROTESTANT AND CATHOLIC

When Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, he had no thought of establishing a separate church. Rather he hoped only to force the Church to reform its doctrines concerning penance and indulgences. Luther had suffered grave anxiety over the destiny of his own soul. Searching in the New Testament for some guide to God's grace, Luther had found the words of St. Paul, "The just shall live by faith." (Romans Ch. 1:17) For Luther, thereafter faith alone provided the means to salvation. But this belief contradicted the Church teachings that salvation required faith in Jesus, participation in the sacraments, and the performance of good works.

Luther continued to challenge the Church's emphasis on good works and the sacraments. Luther claimed that the doctrine of indulgences made a farce of true repentance. Penance and other sacraments encouraged empty participation in religious ritual. Luther further argued that salvation was God's gift to man and that the only means of achieving it was by following the Scriptures and having faith in Jesus.

Luther was very much a man of his times. It was not unusual for a European of the late Middle Ages to be preoccupied with his soul and salvation. And people were questioning the morals, philosophies, and values of medieval Europe as well. When Church theology failed to answer these questions, many reformers left the church and developed Protestant theologies.

Some religious reformers, such as Erasmus, did not leave the Church. And by the mid-sixteenth century the Church had begun its own counter-reformation. Paul III, the first reforming pope, revived the Church council movement begun in the previous century. The council he called

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met in the northern Italian city of Trent periodically between 1545 and 1563 to reexamine and clarify Church beliefs. It reasserted the supreme position of the pope and took strong measures to end immoral practices among the clergy. The material in Reading 20 shows some of the charges leveled against the Church and how the Church responded. As you study the selections, consider the following questions:

Luther: The Sacrament of the Eucharist

The Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist, or the mass, celebrates the Last Supper of Jesus. Jesus had taken bread and wine and called them his body and blood. Then he had told his disciples to repeat

Lutherans receiving wine



Catholic priest drinking wine



what he had done in remembrance of his death on the cross. Roman Catholic Church doctrine holds that Christians who take bread and wine during the mass renew Jesus' sacrifice for man's sins and receive God's mercy.

The medieval Church held to the doctrine of transubstantiation—the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus. In the medieval mass, the priest repeated Jesus' words, offered only the bread to the congregation, and then drank the wine himself. Luther took issue with the Church's definition and administration of the Eucharist in On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, one of the three pamphlets he wrote in 1520.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke agree that Christ gave both the bread and the wine to all of his disciples. No one has denied that Paul gave both to the early Christians. According to Matthew and Mark, Christ did not say concerning the bread, "Eat ye all of this," but did say concerning the cup, "Drink ye all of this." Each writer points out that the disciples drank the wine.

Priests who refuse to give both the bread and wine to members of their congregation commit a sin. The priests are at fault, not the laity [nonpriests]. The sacrament does not belong to the priests, but to all believers. The priests are not lords. They are servants whose duty it is to give both the bread and the wine to those who seek them.

We should interpret the Scriptures accurately. We should read God's words in their simplest meaning. In this case, the early fathers of the Church wrote that Christ took bread and blessed it. The Book of Acts and the Apostle Paul also call it bread. We must understand that the bread and wine of the mass are real bread and real wine. It is not necessary to believe that the bread and wine are transubstantiated by Divine power. This belief is mere opinion. The idea that the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ is not supported by Scripture or by reason.

Luther: Justification by Faith Alone

According to Luther, man could not earn his salvation; he could only receive it from God. God granted salvation to those who accepted the true meaning of the sacrifice of His son, Jesus. Luther spelled out this doctrine of "justification (salvation) by faith" in A Treatise on Christian Liberty, the third pamphlet he published in 1520.

Man is composed of two elements, a spiritual element and a bodily element. The spiritual nature, which we call the soul, may be thought of as the inward man. The bodily nature, which we call the flesh, is the outward man. And, though our outward flesh may perish, the inward soul will have everlasting life if it is renewed in Jesus Christ.

So it will bring no profit to a man if his body is adorned with sacred vestments such as the priests wear, or live in sacred places like the monks, or hold sacred office like a bishop, or pray, fast, and abstain from certain foods. Any person whose inward soul has not been justified by faith in Christ could do any one of these things. On the other hand, the soul will not be injured if the outward body is clothed in ordinary dress, if it should live in ordinary places, or should eat and drink in an ordinary fashion.

One thing, and one thing alone, is necessary for justification of the soul and Christian liberty, and that is the most holy word of God, the Gospel of Christ. As He says: "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me shall not die, but live eternally." The soul can do without everything except the word of God, without which none of its wants are provided for. The Christian is free from doing good works to gain his salvation. He must strengthen his faith.

One who has faith in Christ believes that Christ had died for him. He believes that Christ intercedes with God for his salvation. Not only does Christ pray for us, but he teaches us through his spiritual presence in all of us. Praying for us and teaching us are supposedly the functions of an earthly priest. But since Christ has done these, everyone who believes in him is his own priest.

Here you will ask, "If all who are in the Church are priests, how are those whom we call priests different from the laymen?" I reply that an injustice has been done in giving special powers to a few, when according to the Scriptures they belong to all. Those who are now boastfully called popes, bishops, and priests are called ministers, servants, and stewards in the Bible, for they serve the rest of us by teaching us to have faith in Christ.

Although, as I have said, inward faith in Christ is enough for salvation, still the outward man, or the man of the flesh, lives a mortal life in which he comes into contact with other men. Here then, good works begin. The outward man will perform good works if faith and Christ's spirit have become part of the inward man, or the soul. When he follows the instructions of his inner self, he comes into conflict with the will of his flesh, which is to seek gratification. But the spirit of faith will not let the outward man do this. Using this principle of letting the inward faith dictate the actions of the outward man, every man can easily decide for himself how he ought to behave. But those who pretend to gain salvation by doing good works are only fooling themselves. Truly good works do not make a man good, but a good man will do good works.

The Catholic Reformation: The Council of Trent

Church authorities consider the Council of Trent the most important council in the modern history of the Roman Catholic Church. The following passages are taken from the council's decrees.

The Canons and Decrees of
the Council of Trent.
Language simplified.

Let the following be cursed: anyone who says that the New Testament does not provide for a distinct priesthood; anyone who says that priests do not have the power of bringing about the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ; anyone who preaches that priests do not have the power of forgiving or not forgiving; and anyone who says on the other hand that a priest is merely a minister whose only duty is to preach the gospel.

If anyone says that a man can be justified before God by doing good works without also having the divine grace of Jesus Christ, let him be cursed.

If anyone says that a sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that it is not necessary for him to receive sacraments to prepare for grace, let him be cursed.

If anyone says that a man's justification before God is not increased by his good works, let him be cursed.

In order that Christians may receive the sacraments with greater devotion, this holy council commands that bishops and priests should first explain the purpose and use of the sacraments in a way that the congregation can understand, using the native tongue of the people if it is necessary.

It is to be desired that all who become bishops should understand what portion of their income should be devoted to their own maintenance, and to comprehend that they are called to the office of bishop not for riches or luxury, but to the labors and cares for the glory of God.

